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ABSTRACT

Social scientists seeking relevance in their disciplines should search for the touchstone of this relevance in the cultural order instead of in their social science disciplines. Culture preserves the distilled wisdon of the past but it also encapsulates much that is harmful, and even fatal, to human existence. Such basic questions of culture such as who eats what, what do we do with waste products, who dominates whom, who marries whom, who invents what, who rationalizes what, and who teaches what to whom must be asked to get at what is relevant. A cross-cultural perspective can give us these vitally needed perspectives on current problems of social crisis and pollution. The implications of American passion for eating beef, our inhibitions toward intelligent policies for recycling waste, the reality of dominance in social relationships, the decline in the family as a social institution, and the power of ideas to influence peoples' life styles have world-wide future significance. Yet the history of human development exhibits constant pressure toward ever larger groups, more complex modes of dominance, exploitation, technology, and rationalizations. A civilization cannot both grow and remain the same; therefore, humanity must learn to live under the curse of culture rather than die under it. Relevance comes in the attempt to modify this culture to avoid pitfalls and find positive solutions. (Author/DE)

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THE CURSE OF CULTURE

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FOREWORD

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Culture preserves the distilled wisdom of the past; it also encapsulates much that is harmful, and could be fatal, to human existence. A cross-cultural perspective can give us vitally needed perspectives on current problems of crisis, pollution, and relevance.

What are the implications of the American passion for eating beef in preference to pork, lamb, chicken, fish, antelope, and pigeon?

Do learned inhibitions keep us from devising intelligent policies for recycling waste on the "spaceship earth"? Has education about tooth-brushing and sex stood in the way of teaching about the functions and potentialities of the family? Do our deep-set convictions about the nature of "program" prevent us from understanding the nature of Greek, Roman, and modern American social crises?

These are some of the issues Professor Bohannan touches in this paper, which was presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies in November 1969 at Houston, Texas.

Irving Morrissett
Executive Director

January 1971

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THE CURSE OF CULTURE

Paul Bohannan
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Introduction

In times of severe social stress, social science is plagued by the problem of its relevance. During World War II the emotions, and hence the attention, of social scientists, as well as of other men throughout the world, were dominated by that war. As a result we got anthropological (and other social science) contributions to knowledge created in the crucible of current need. Even Malinowski wrote a book on warfare--interesting, terribly relevant, but one of his least successful efforts. Today, in order to evaluate material written at that time, we must maintain a keen sense of historicity. World War II, with its dangers and its atrocities, dominated our minds. The search for relevance was then, as it is now, an artifact of stress.

With the possible exception of the caper of McCarthy the First, we in social science are today involved in the most massive of these inward-turning periods since World War II. Because our emotions are dominated by stress, our minds grasp at straws of relevance. However, we must seek the touchstone of relevance out there in the social and cultural order--or, perhaps, disorder--of our day, not within the order of social science.

Basic Questions

It is a sign of the seriousness of the situation in the outside world that we must go right back to the basic questions. The basic questions in social science are very simple because they are so basic. Yet arriving at those questions is difficult. We have to find specific questions about such generalities

as these: (1) Who eats what? (2) What do we do with so-called "waste products"? (3) Who lives with whom in what kind of shelter? These are basic questions of food and shelter.

The next questions are more difficult--difficult because they are more discomfiting: (4) Who dominates whom? (5) Who exploits whom? And, in both questions, to what end? Such questions take us to the heart of our ways of looking at primary political and economic activities, of whatever society or whatever age.

The anthropological way--and this is part of its value--is to ask the questions in such general terms that we perceive the vast differences between one society and another, between one era and another. Only by asking questions in such a way can we get starkly simple answers.

But we can't stop there. We must go on to ask: (6) Who has sexual relations with whom, under what circumstances, and to what ends? And some simple historical questions, that are nevertheless difficult to answer: (7) Who invents what? and (8) Who rationalizes what, and what form does the rationalization take--theology? science? revolution?

And finally we must ask an absolutely basic question of relevance: (9) Who teaches what and to whom?

Obviously, in a paper of this length the only thing to do is to touch briefly on a few of these topics. We have chosen these questions: Who eats what? What do we do with waste products? Who dominates whom? Who marries whom? Who invents what? and Who rationalizes what? And throughout, we must keep asking, as a sort of envoi: who teaches what and to whom?

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Who Eats What?

The Kiplinger Washington letter is an excellent source of data for this kind of question. Biases are simple to figure out and easy to correct for. On November 21, 1969, the Kiplinger letter had some important things to say about food as a basic industry. Considering food production as a basic industry is a truism. Food is obviously basic, whatever the degree and type of industrialization. Eating patterns, Kiplinger assures us, are shifting. American diets are changing and the government is going to see to it that we change them even more. First of all, as a result of massive propaganda campaigns, we will reduce our caloric intake so that there will be fewer fat people in the country: we will also reduce our cholesterol intake so that there will be fewer heart attacks. Because both of these changes extend the expectation of life, there will be ramifications into the areas of demography and geriatrics.

Next we are assured what we probably already guessed--that the cost of food will rise 20% in the next five years, and that the price of beef will soar. We are, as Kiplinger notes, a nation of beef-eaters. Every meat that is not beef is called a "beef substitute" in the food industry. Chicken and turkey are the favorite beef substitutes of Americans; pork and lamb are less favorite beef substitutes. Fish as a beef substitute is the least favorite, and its use as a beef substitute will not expand as fast as the use of chicken. Those are the only meats that the Kiplinger letter mentions. It is a meager list; we are indeed a nation of beef-eaters.

And what is all this beef-eating doing, besides raising our cholesterol level? To sum it up quickly, we are devastating the Great Plains and the ranching areas of the country. The genus bos is not very well adapted to the country we provide for it. Beef is not merely more costly in money than any other kind of meat; it is more costly to basic soil fertility. It is, of course,

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true that the Great Plains will support bovines; after all, look at the buffalo. However, ecological balance demands that other animals also be present. And it is this we have slipped up on. We want there to be absolutely nothing but cows.

Ecologists assure us that we could, pound for edible pound, raise more antelope in the Great Plains than we can beef, with much less danger of land erosion and exhaustion. Antelope live on native American plants more efficiently than cattle. However, Americans are a nation of beef-eaters.

Beef is good meat, but so is antelope. If we are going to reduce our death rate, then we are going to have to increase our food production, even if it means changing species or, better, adding species to our repertoire of foodstuffs. We know that antelope can be domesticated readily, that they thrive under domesticated conditions, and that the meat is good tasting and nutritious. But antelope doesn't even rank as a beef substitute in our culture.

Our food preferences are putting a load on the earth's resources that must be understood. There is no better way to examine the problem of diet and the production of food than through the comparative information available through anthropology. Yet in our schools, diet is too often taught in science courses instead of in social science. It should be in both.

Anthropology can help us to answer--indeed to ask--some questions about diet, and what different diets do for us. What about a fish and corn meal diet, which is found in parts of Africa? What additives would be necessary to reach maximal efficiency? What does a basically vegetable diet, as provided in much of India, actually do for us? The information is readily available, but unfortunately not yet compiled in a form in which this kind of question can be used en masse in the classroom.

Kurt Lewin said long ago--during World War II when this topic was relevant--that people do not eat what they like, but rather they like what they eat. Diets

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can be changed. We discovered in World War II that people are not really as single-mindedly devoted to their diets as we had thought. Diets can be changed, and one of the criteria that we must take into account in changing diets today is not just longevity and the health of the individual animal but also something about the way each particular diet affects the environment. From the standpoint of calories or even from the standpoint of trace minerals, our diets may be superior to those of many other peoples of the world. But how about our diet from the standpoint of the future of the world?

Several questions, all of them terribly relevant, flow from this question. Why have we domesticated so few animals when so many of them are hanging around asking for a better choice than extinction? Antelope, elk, a number of edible rodents, birds--many could easily be domesticated. The raccoon has been begging to be domesticated for centuries. But our narrow culture can find no use for domesticated raccoons, so the raccoon is defined as useless and relegated to raiding garbage cans. Why can't we teach ourselves that a pigeon can be a staple instead of squab being a delicacy? Why can't we farm the very urban streets by growing pigeons? I am not suggesting that we indoctrinate our students to eat pigeon, but that we make them sensibly informed about the cultural aspects of diet so that when their turn comes they will be in a position to carry out research programs on diet instead of merely "upgrading" diets ethnocentrically. How relevant can you get?

What Do We Do With So-Called "Waste Products"?

Life is a complex chemical process for turning food into waste. Isak Dinesen that magnificent Danish writer of English, whose real name was the Baroness Karen Blixen, put it delicately: the human body is a complex and unbelievably efficient mechanism for converting the great wines of Shiraz into urine. One can call this the "inverse Midas syndrome."

Ecologists and space scientists have taught us, in the last few years, to look at this problem in terms of the recycling of chemical elements and of the influence of social systems and culture on that recycling. In space travel the environment must go with us and is so circumscribed that the cycle has to be a very short one in order that compactness can be achieved. That is to say, the devices for turning carbon dioxide back into carbon and oxygen have to be extremely efficient. The squeamishness of space travellers has to go by the board. In short, waste products must be immediately returned to food.

Now the balance of nature on "spaceship earth" is the same process stretched out in time a little bit and rendered invisible. In a balanced ecology, the recycling of all chemicals is in a moving equilibrium. What is waste to one organism is food to another, and the result is no large-scale change because of the very fact of constant and repetitive small-scale changes. All this is a dimension of the principles of survival that biologists discovered in the 19th century--survival and the resultant biological evolution.

However, there has been a built-in resistance in Western culture to realization of the degree to which human beings, too, are involved in recycling. Today we have to face the fact that all culture, in a very real and immediate sense, is the waste material created by human life. Human living makes culture. And the question, therefore, has to be: What out there in the environment can turn culture back into food--that is, into something usable by people.

Culture changes the recycling balance of nature. Stone tools from two million years ago have never recycled. However, that is comparatively unimportant because they are inorganic; chipping a tool is physical change but not chemical change. When metals came to be used they could be recycled, but not efficiently. What about glass? Glass is a rearrangement of sand, primarily again a matter of inorganic substance. Glass will eventually return to sand; in

the meantime we cut our feet on it in a new and efficient way for a few hundred or thousand years.

All human habitations have midden heaps surrounding them; archeologists would very soon be out of business if it were not so. I do not care whether you are looking at the mounds of clam and oyster shells surrounding early Scandanavian settlements or the mounds of garbage that surround New York City. We are still making midden heaps, assuming that nature will recycle our waste.

But the question is now becoming urgent--indeed relevant. How do you recycle plastic? How do you recycle the carbon that we are turning into the atmosphere by burning prehistoric fuels? We all know that carbon dioxide is being added to our atmosphere every year in vastly increasing proportion; we also know that the oxygen will run out in a few centuries, perhaps less, if we do not do something. And yet do you know anybody who is working on the development of a plant with an increased and efficient through-put system so that the balance of oxygen can be maintained? I don't. If we can breed a white marigold, surely we can breed a rubber plant that will triple its oxygen output.

The Cross Cultural Perspective

The relevance of all this is patent. That anthropology can help is a simple dimension of the fact that in order to see the big ecological problem at all, you have to see it cross-culturally. Our ways show up as limited, culture-bound ways only if we compare them to other cultural ways--or else if we almost die of them. Anthropology, in creating a sort of stereoscopic vision, can hopefully make us see our own culture overtly before it becomes even more lethal than it already is.

We should add here that all cultures--not just our own--are wasteful of the environment. Note, for example, the African system of ash-planting, cultivation which destroys forests which then require literally decades to reach full

fertility again after a mere three years' use. Those Africans have mined their land to almost the same degree we have mined ours.

The relevance of all this is not determined by the intellectual constructs of social science or ecology, but by our general culture and life needs--the context of ecology and the social sciences. Some of our students will have to devise ways for recycling not only their own waste, but ours as well. The alternative is unthinkable. No wonder they are angry! No wonder some of them displace their anger into the kind of activity which really does not help. It is our job to believe with them, sometimes against the evidence of our very senses, that something must be done.

Who Dominates Whom?

It is a mammalian characteristic that all social groups, with no exceptions, are based on the dominance of one animal over another, extended to one social group over another. The relationship may be a weak and loose one, as it is among chimpanzees, or it may be a tight and profound one as it is among rhesus monkeys and chickens.

Power is a necessary dimension of all social relationships. This means that the problem of the morality of power, as well as the problem of the structuring of power within groups, is a universal human problem. Since we cannot avoid the problem, we must search for criteria for regulating it to our best advantage.

Now, what do we, or our students, do to make these questions "relevant"? They just throw in a little context. Instead of "Who dominates whom?", our students ask, "What right has the Military-Industrial Complex of the Establishment to run our lives?" To the question, "What do we do with waste products?" they simply add a little relevance-context to our specific problems in our specific age: "What right have profit-making producers to foul our waters and our air?"

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I have here done no more than to give two sets of language in which to ask questions. The questions are extremely relevant; but sometimes they are stated in such a way as almost to insure that they will not be heard. Teachers must help students find usable ways of asking the questions.

Who Marries Whom?

The most fundamental social group in any society is its family. I have little patience with the prognosticating Cassandras who lament that human beings are outgrowing the family. Rather, in all situations of social disorganization, the family reflects--indeed, acts out for the society--the problems of the total society. The proportion of nonfamilial sexuality goes up and family failure in socialization increases. The family then has to take the rap for the total picture, because it is the closest and safest institution to rebel against.

Although I am not prepared to say that it will always be so, it always has been so that human beings are familying animals, in the same way that bovines are herding animals, that prairie dogs are towning animals, and that fish are schooling animals. All small human groups can be analyzed in terms of interaction among an instrumental leader, an affective leader, and followers. The nuclear family is the prototype of such groups.

It is true that there are different forms of the family. There are the polygynous family, the polyandrous family, the extended family, and a few others. The differences among them are very slight when we compare the family with any nonhuman social group. I am not saying that the family either will or should retain the outlines, the membership, and the functions that it has today. Indeed, perhaps it should not. But some form of family is the only social institution that can do everything that is required by human beings--except, of course, provide a mate, and such an institution as cross-cousin marriage is an attempt to haul even that into the orbit of the family.

The study of families in the schools has gotten mixed up with a number of other topics, particularly a course on how to brush your teeth that is usually called "Family Living." Today, it has even gotten involved in the problem of sex education. This is a temporary situation, and it is a pity. The study of family organizations and their place in the development of mankind and in the history of the species is far too important to get mixed up with the narrow morality of somebody's own particular idea about the way families should cooperate or how sex should be discussed. After all, who marries whom--or at least, who impregnates whom--is the basis of human evolution. It is also one of the two basic social mechanisms, the other one, of course, being dominance. We can examine almost all small fundamental groupings as a concatenation of the principles of dominance and mating.

Who Invents What?

In the course of human evolution, no important cultural acquisition has ever been lost. We have, of course, lost specific manifestations of such acquisitions. We have lost some alphabets, but we have not lost the art or idea of writing. You may say that if we had lost an acquisition, we would not know about it. That is logical, but it is unlikely that archaeologists would not have turned up some kind of evidence of a major cultural acquisition.

The nature of culture is that, once it is brought into existence, it leaves an indelible mark on the species. Archaeologists have discovered that, once the earth has been disturbed by hoe, plow, or bulldozer, the wound never heals. The scar is always there. Freud discovered that once a human being has an experience, that experience cannot be removed. It may be thrust out of consciousness, but it cannot be undone; we bear the marks of all our experiences. And, in the same way, no cultural invention ever disappears without a trace. It may change to the point that the original invention is scarcely recognizable. Nevertheless

neither individual organisms, nor culturally-manifested societies, nor the earth itself can go back to an earlier condition. You can't go home again.

Thus, culture is cumulative. We are today reaping the rewards not merely of the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, but also of the Agricultural Revolution and the Pleistocene hunting complex. We are also paying the price that all of these advances in culture exact from us; and, at the moment, the price seems terribly high.

Culture, obviously, rises above human intent. We are stuck with it and, therefore, who invents what is the essential of history. Not just technological history, but the moral history of mankind along with it. And that takes us to the next basic question.

Who Rationalizes What?

It is a universal human characteristic to make things appear to be reasonable. There are many ways of rationalizing cultural, as well as non-cultural, aspects of the human condition. These rationalizations can be called "science," or "theology," or "witchcraft," or any of a wide variety of such dogmas. Ideas have a profound influence on who dominates whom, who exploits whom, who marries whom, and who invents what. When an idea changes one of these relationships, we say a cultural revolution has occurred. It may or may not be, but often is, accompanied by a social revolution.

Let me give an example, and in the process say something about the way I think world history should be taught, at about the tenth-grade level--though, of course, these ideas must inform the social studies curriculum at all levels.

In the process of humanization of the human animal, mankind became the tool-using primate par excellence and centered his social organization around the small hunting band. The dominance structure lay within the band of agnatic kinsmen and was determined by age, character, and ability. Most of the bands of

which we have any record (and they are pitiably few) were exogamous; that is, the men married women from other such bands. There was a precise and highly-valued division of labor between men and women, and the exploitation of the males and the females, both young and old, more or less evened out to create a balanced dependency as well as a balanced exploitation. Nobody felt he was an underdog. We have very little information on the way in which such people rationalized their existence; but we can assume, on the basis of the material remains that they left, something of a religion, associated with hunting and childbearing, and a good knowledge of technical processes that could be passed on from one generation to the next.

Then came the Agricultural Revolution. Some 10,000 years or so ago, the terribly simple idea of agriculture took hold, as a way of life, though the elements of agriculture had probably been known for centuries or perhaps for millennia before. What were the results? First of all, agriculture relieved people of a certain type of dependency on one ecological situation and thrust them into a very much greater and deeper dependency on another ecological situation. The Agricultural Revolution changed the way people worked and, therefore, their very body musculature. It changed their food habits. It even changed their basic insecurities; and, therefore, their rationalizations had to be changed. Religion changed from a concern with hunting and the spirits of the animals to a concern with fertility and ensuring increases in crops.

Growth And Culture Change

The number of people that the world can support through agriculture is very much greater than the number that can be supported through hunting. This is terribly obvious, but terribly important. We all know that the Agricultural Revolution gave rise to so many changes in technology that we might almost say that it was the first step in what we have come to think of as the Industrial

Revolution. The history of human development exhibits constant pressure toward ever larger groups, ever more complex modes of dominance and exploitation, ever more complicated inventions, and ever more clever rationalizations.

One can at present only give examples of the process: Greek culture began as the set of attributes of a very small group of people; its very success made it applicable over a wider area and it grew. Growing--both in numbers of people and in complexity of cultural items--created a change in it. A civilization cannot both grow and remain the same. Greek civilization spread out; as it spread out, it reached the maximum of its efficiency and then, necessarily, changed into something else. That something else sometimes looks to us as a crumbling into less worthy cultures, even a decline from civilization.

The same process happened again with Rome. Its very success allowed it to spread over the Mediterranean world and beyond; but in that spread, Roman society was made obsolete. It changed its social forms in a way that has led some historians to say that Rome collapsed.

Again at the time of the Renaissance something started in the Italian states and spread, this time all over the world. The Industrial Revolution is just one phase of the spread of Renaissance culture, though it would seem to be its most dominating aspect. And now the Renaissance culture's very success, its very spread, is causing it to change beyond all recognition. The rampant social change of our own era also can easily be experienced as collapse.

"Collapse" or Just "Change"?

I think we must do two things to be relevant in this matter. We must remember the so-called collapses of Greece and Rome and realize that they were only collapses in the judgment of historians. These were intense social changes that came about because of increased cultural complexity and increased numbers of participants in society.

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The same thing happened in China, but in different rhythms. About 1,000 years ago, the Chinese had built up the greatest navy in the world, dominating the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean, trading far and wide--as far as the coasts of Africa and New Guinea. However, the Chinese saw at that time that, if they continued the expansion of the navy and the importance of foreign goods within their own tradition, then their way of life--their social organization and their cultural values--were in danger. And the Chinese did something that was very brave and very foolish. They destroyed the navy. They opted for the old morality and the known social system.

Only a few centuries later, Europeans were faced with the same choice; and they did something equally brave and equally foolish. They opted for the technological over the moral alternative. Technology became the guiding light of Western civilization.

It is an irony worthy of Greek drama that Westerners and Chinese are not merely sitting face to face with each other but that each is today sitting face to face with the problem that was avoided a thousand years ago.

Relevance and the Curse of Culture

Not long ago, in an attempt to escape from the distressingly relevant into the eternal, I picked up my copy of the Complete Greek Drama. And I turned to Antigone. There was a woman of principle, a revolutionary worthy of a flower and willing to die for her principles, no matter how stupid they appear.

I found that Sophocles had written this:

> And through the future, near and far,
> as through the past, shall this law hold
> good: Nothing that is vast enters into
> the field of mortals without a curse.

How relevant can you get?

Today we as human creatures are dealing with the curse of culture. We have already had its benediction: we are not "mere" animals. We are gourmets, drivers of automobiles, consumers of plastic, framers of constitutions, and manufacturers of philosophies. And like any other piece of the environment on which we feed, we toss away the waste and walk off. That is Sophocles' curse, with a vengeance. It is worth repeating:

> And through the future, near and far,
> as through the past, shall this law hold
> good: Nothing that is vast enters into
> the field of mortals without a curse.

Now I am going to suggest that at least some educators are quite literally AFRAID TO BE RELEVANT. They would be branded a boat-rocker at very best. And they'd better not rock the boat--the river is too polluted.

What is relevance? It is learning to live with the curse of culture rather than to die under it. It is not just a few devices for reburning carbon on automobiles or gathering soot on smokestacks. Rather, it is having the courage to examine what we eat in its full context, how we love in the light of evolution, how we play in the context of all culture, and what we teach, from the standpoint of the entire human experience.

The curse is working. Look around you and dare to ask if social science is relevant!

We are living today with a deep irony: the benediction of culture is the curse of culture. If the times seem out of joint, it is because we have only in the last decade or so recognized this irony. In that short time things have gotten so far out of balance, the benediction has become so fateful a curse, that we cannot any longer kid ourselves. We must see it.

And what can the social science educator do now? It is simple to say, but very difficult to do. He must examine the curse. We cannot restore an old ecological equilibrium. We have to do something much more difficult: we have

to create a new one. Only in a moving equilibrium is the benediction worth the cost of the curse. It is the curse of man that in order to enjoy the comforts of the benediction, he must work, constantly work, to exorcise the curse. Educators must help their students to see that this is the fact of life, and they must help give them the courage to find challenges instead of cop-outs. Never has teaching or social science been so relevant.

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